

REJECTING DEAD HERETICS: THE CASE FOR AN EXEGETICAL THEOLOGY

INTRODUCTION

Tertullian famously asked asked—
“**What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?**”¹

That is, What has **Greek philosophy** to do with the **Bible**?

Or as I want to put it to you today—
What have **dead pagans** like **Plato and Aristotle**
or **dead heretics** like **Thomas Aquinas**
have to do with the church?

As **recent theological trends** that seek to retrieve the so-called “**Great Tradition**” clearly illustrate, the church once again needs to hear Tertullian’s thunderous warning to to return to the **authority and sufficiency of Scripture**.

Like Tertullian, I want to **unambiguously assert** that all the truth the Christian needs to know has been revealed in the Word of God.

Therefore, as I urge you to **reject the influence** of dead pagans and dead heretics over the church’s theology,
I want to issue a clarion call to embrace the **reformed principle of *Sola Scriptura*** and its implications for the ministry of the Word.

¹ Nick Needham, *2000 Years of Christ’s Power: The Age of the Early Church Fathers*, Newly Revised Edition, vol. 1 (Ross-shire, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2016), 140.

To put it **simply** but perhaps **more controversially**,
I want to issue a call to **embrace biblicism**.

If you hear that word and scorn the idea because you view the label as a pejorative that describes the
“No creed but the Bible” approach to theology,
then my aim is to convince you that the that such a representation is a **caricature of the convictions** that I hope to instil in you today.

On the other hand, if you hear that word and resonate with the idea because you embrace the convictions I will speak of today,
then my aim is to strengthen your hand and encourage your heart to **remain steadfastly committed** to *Sola Scriptura* and its implications for the ministry of the Word.

That said, I am far more concerned with your commitment to *Sola Scriptura* and the convictions that flow from it than I am with your use of a label.

Therefore, my clarion call is to **the supremacy of Scripture** and, in particular, **to its sufficiency for the church’s theology**.

As **Abner Chou**, president of The Master’s University and Seminary, has observed, the sufficiency of Scripture is the **great doctrinal challenge of our day**.

As he wrote, “*While many Christians affirm the inspiration and inerrancy of Scripture and even agree on fundamental principles of interpretation, there remains a troubling tendency to compromise with respect to the sufficiency of Scripture.*

[PTO]

Some endorse the veracity of the Bible, but hesitate to acknowledge its authority over every matter of life, choosing to allow other voices and professionals outside of Scripture to shape their thinking and practice.”²

It is my contention that we need a **renewed and steadfast commitment** to the **sufficiency of Scripture** not only in preaching and counselling, but even in our theological method.

There is a growing chorus of those who are calling us away from the sufficiency of Scripture for our theology.

They want us to allow the voices of **dead pagans**, like **Plato and Aristotle**, and **dead heretics**, like **Aquinas**, to shape our theological method and the doctrine that we, thereby, believe and teach.

Like a trojan horse, those destructive influences are being snuck into the church through **philosophical and theological methods** of interpreting Scripture and formulating doctrine.

So my ambition is to inspire you to **reject** dead pagans and dead heretics and **embrace an exegetical method of theology** as the method most consistent with *Sola Scriptura*.

Or, as I believe I can say that simply, my ambition is to inspire you to be **unashamed and unwavering biblicalists**.

² Abner Chou, “The Sufficiency of Scripture Summit,” *The Master’s University*, accessed May 21, 2026, <https://www.masters.edu/about/why-tmu/sufficiency/>.

THE CONCERN

So to begin, let me **discuss the concern** that prompted this **exhortation to embrace biblicism**.

It has been a trend among academia's theologians to call for the **theological retrieval of the "Great Tradition."**

As **D. A. Carson** explains—

*"Recent years have witnessed many biblical interpreters distancing themselves from the dominant hermeneutical approaches of the last two centuries or so in favour of what is variously called premodern hermeneutics, or the hermeneutics of the Great Tradition."*³

While there is an **admirable intention** within this movement to reject the influences of higher criticism in our interpretation and theologising of Scripture,

we should be **alarmed to hear** the deliberate distancing from our contemporary hermeneutics.

We should also be **careful to distinguish** the "Great Tradition" from the larger movement of theological retrieval.

³ D. A. Carson, "Apostolic Hermeneutics: Present-Day Imitation," in *Dictionary of the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*, ed. G. K. Beale et al. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic: A Division of Baker Publishing Group, 2023), 60.

Wyatt Graham, Academic Dean of Carey Theological College, writes—

*“Theological retrieval retrieves the Great Tradition for the life of the church today. Retrieval is the historical and spiritual act of looking back to a Christian consensus on theology, practice, and metaphysics for the sake of renewing the church today.”*⁴

Kevin Vanhoozer confirms and clarifies that—

*“Theological retrieval is not simply ‘retro’ theology. ‘Retrieval’ names a way of doing theology ‘that looks back in order to move forward.’ What motivates this return is not nostalgia... but rather the conviction that past resources... are precisely what we need in the present situation.”*⁵

So then, we understand that theological retrieval refers to **resourcing contemporary systematic theology** by engaging historical theology—

essentially drawing on the church’s intellectual heritage to strengthen present-day theological work.

At first, this may sound **benign, or even beneficial**.

After all, do we not stand on the shoulders of those who have gone before us?

Do we not, therefore, have a deep appreciation for both **church history** and the **historical theology** it communicates to us?

⁴ Wyatt Graham, “What Is the Great Tradition? Is it Too Great to Be True?,” *Logos Blog* (Logos Bible Software), December 8, 2025, <https://www.logos.com/grow/hall-the-great-tradition/>.

⁵ Kevin J. Vanhoozer, “Theology: Don’t Call It ‘Retro’: Retrieval Theologians Are Looking Back to Move Forward,” *Didaktikos: Journal of Theological Education* 1, no. 2 (2018): 41.

Vanhoozer, in his book, ***Mere Christian Hermeneutics***, writes:

*“The way out of modern and postmodern impasses in biblical interpretation involves a retrieval of earlier theological practices of reading the Bible—ways of reading to hear, know, and meet God, and to know oneself before God.”*⁶

Who doesn’t want to read Scripture in order to “hear, know, and meet God, and to know oneself before God”?

But as we ask **why we need to jettison** the theological practices that have been **refined through 2000 years** of church history,

we start to get the **nagging suspicion** that the effort of the retrieval project to present the splendour of the Great Tradition has actually left us **staring at the embarrassment of a naked emperor**.

Consider what this **garb of the Great Tradition** actually represents—

it is not, as one might naively assume, a simple effort to retrieve the very best of historical theology.

Rather, as one of the leading proponents, **Craig Carter**, writes in his book, ***Interpreting Scripture with the Great Tradition: Recovering the Genius of Premodern Exegesis***—

⁶ Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Mere Christian Hermeneutics: Transfiguring What It Means to Read the Bible Theologically* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2024), 369.

“The Great Tradition was a three-legged stool made up of spiritual exegesis, Nicene dogma, and Christian Platonist metaphysics.

By pressing deep into the meaning of the text contemplatively, spiritual exegesis yielded the trinitarian and christological dogmas, which in turn generated certain metaphysical doctrines such as creation ex nihilo and the reality of the spiritual realm.

The metaphysics then created a hospitable context for further spiritual exegesis in which the interpreter penetrated through the literal sense to that to which the text referred, the spiritual or heavenly realities that led upward eventually to participation in the divine radiance.”⁷

Perhaps I need to be blunt—that is **mystical nonsense!**

Those who are so **enamoured with retrieval** might be better served in retrieving the words of the apostle Paul when he wrote to the Colossian church out of grave concern that they would be deluded by **“persuasive argument”** as he said in **Colossians 2:4**.

Are we not facing **the very danger that Paul warns against** in **Colossians 2:8**—

⁸ See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception, according to the tradition of men, according to the elementary principles of the world, and not according to Christ.

⁷ Craig A. Carter, *Interpreting Scripture with the Great Tradition: Recovering the Genius of Premodern Exegesis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic: A division of Baker Publishing Group, 2018), 111.

Though it comes wrapped up in the **intellectual sophistication** and **spiritual mysticism** that has deceived many,

we must wake up and be alert to the dangers of this theological retrieval, especially the retrieval of the Great Tradition.

In case you think that a harsh characterisation, consider **Carter's own words** in **Credo Magazine**, the flagship publication of the retrieval project—

“We need to listen, learn, and humbly seek to rise to [the Church Fathers and scholastics’] level of theological and philosophical sophistication in our interpretation of Scripture and our dogmatic formulations. This is the goal of the Great Tradition retrieval project.”⁸

To be clear, as I make my case that a **commitment to Sola Scriptura** and **the biblicism that applies the sufficiency of Scripture** to theology by means of an **exegetical method**,

I am in no way rejecting or diminishing the importance of historical theology.

I say that, even though **Matthew Barrett** makes the claim in his book **The Reformation as Renewal: Retrieving the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church** that biblicists have an “ahistorical mindset”.

⁸ Craig A. Carter, “The Great Tradition Retrieval Project: Correcting a Few Misunderstandings,” *Credo Magazine*, August 11, 2022, <https://credomag.com/2022/08/the-great-tradition-retrieval-project-correcting-a-few-misunderstandings/>.

He writes, “*Biblicism is a haughty disregard (chronological snobbery in the words of C. S. Lewis) for the history of interpretation and the authority of creeds and confessions, chanting an individualistic mantra, ‘No creed but the Bible,’ which in practice translates into ‘No authority but me.’ Sola scriptura is radicalized into solo scriptura.*”⁹

It is rather ironic that biblicists are accused of chronological snobbery when the retrievalists are in fact the ones who claim, as **Vanhoozer** does, that “*classic sources outweigh contemporary norms.*”¹⁰

Make no mistake, the position that I am advocating under the label “biblicism” is the object of scorn.

For example, **Pat Abendroth**, took a jab when he wrote—
“*The first time I searched ‘biblicism’ in my massive logos platform, I found that the only ones affirming were dispensationalists and non serious scholars.*”¹¹

Beyond his podcast episodes on **The Pactum** where he rails against biblicism, he has written that, “*Biblicism is a bane.*”¹²

He’s also claimed that, “*Biblicism is a hard drug to kick*” and even that, “*Biblicism is cultic.*”¹³

⁹ Matthew Barrett, *The Reformation as Renewal: Retrieving the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2023), 21.

¹⁰ Vanhoozer, “Theology: Don’t Call It ‘Retro,’” 41.

¹¹ <https://x.com/PatAbendroth/status/1964522197739037182>

¹² <https://x.com/PatAbendroth/status/1669460606611587073>

¹³ <https://x.com/PatAbendroth/status/1925727363997843915>; <https://x.com/PatAbendroth/status/1786230287573160304>

The reason for the animosity is that those advocating for the retrieval of the Great Tradition **reject the hermeneutical narrowness of the biblicists.**

It is the commitment to a **literal-grammatical-historical hermeneutic** that **Barrett** has in mind when he chides—

“Biblicism moves beyond believing in the final authority of the Bible to imposing a restrictive hermeneutical method onto the Bible.”¹⁴

Indeed, as **he wrote elsewhere**, he believes that—

“The grammatical-historical method alone produces less than biblical results.

The classical method [the method we are supposed to “retrieve” from the Great Tradition] does not just pursue knowledge but wisdom. It's participatory exegesis: through revelation we have communion with God.”¹⁵

So what is at stake, then, is **the method we use in both** the interpretation of Scripture and the systematisation of Scripture's doctrine that we call “theology.”

So as I raise my concern and ring the alarm bell, I ask whether we are being lured into retrieving a Great Tradition or **digging up a rotting corpse?**

I will argue that this retrieval project, while it may have commendable qualities to it, is nevertheless **as defective as what it is dangerous** to the church and the theology we hold.

¹⁴ Barrett, *Reformation as Renewal*, 21.

¹⁵ <https://x.com/MattMBarrett/status/1643252124195627019>

There are two concerns that I want to raise specifically, though my concerns are certainly not limited to these two.

a. Philosophical Interpretation

My first concern about the Great Tradition and the retrieval project that aims to bring it back into the church is that it **advocates for a new hermeneutic** that embraces the **philosophical interpretation of Scripture**.

We have already heard **Carter's claim** that the Great Tradition stands on three legs, including
"Christian Platonist metaphysics."

In fact, another leading proponent of this project is **Hans Boersma** who writes—

*"Without metaphysics—specifically, without a good dose of Plato—it becomes difficult to retain the teaching of Scripture."*¹⁶

He is unapologetic in calling for our theology to be shaped by the philosophy of Plato by synthesising his ideas with Scripture.

As he writes, *"The Bible cannot be interpreted without prior metaphysical commitments and that we need Christian Platonism as an interpretive lens in order to uphold Scripture's teaching."*¹⁷

¹⁶ Hans Boersma, *Five Things Theologians Wish Biblical Scholars Knew* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic: An imprint of InterVarsity Press, 2021), 39.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 40.

Who was Plato?

Plato was a student of Socrates, and philosophers quip that the history of philosophy is a **series of footnotes to Plato**.¹⁸

He and Aristotle are counted as **the two greatest minds** in Western philosophical history.

It is an undisputed that the early church fathers were heavily influenced by Plato and his ideas.

But Plato was a rank pagan whose ideas **plagued the early church** as the Fathers consistently relied on philosophy instead of Scripture for their theology.

It is this philosophy that Tertullian decried to which the retrievalists would have us return.

As **Carter** states plainly, **“Christian Platonism”** with its philosophical *“antimaterialism, antimechanism, antinominalism, antirelativism, and antiskepticism still [constitutes] the core ideas of the nonnaturalistic theological metaphysics of the Great Tradition of Christianity.”*¹⁹

To expose the emperor’s nakedness, let me quote again from **Boersma** who writes—

*“We need a good dose of Plato for some of the key teachings of Scripture to become intelligible.”*²⁰

¹⁸ Richard C. Gamble, *The Whole Counsel of God: God’s People in the Western World*, vol. 3 (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2021), 19–20.

¹⁹ Carter, *Interpreting Scripture with the Great Tradition*, 90.

²⁰ Boersma, *Five Things Theologians Wish Biblical Scholars*, 62.

Again, “*Faith isn’t meant to function without reason, and we shouldn’t attempt to do theology without philosophy.*”²¹

Louis Markos, writing his article, “**Why We Still Need Plato**” for *Credo Magazine* contends—

“*A healthy, corrective dose of Plato can help us not only to preserve the purity of Christian doctrine but to think properly about that doctrine.*”²²

The retrieval isn’t content to **dig up the dead corpse** of the pagan philosopher Plato alone, but **digs up the grave of his greatest student**, Aristotle.

Aristotle was was convinced that **logic is the foundation** on which the principles of all true judgment depend.²³

Aristotle was “rediscovered” during the Middle Ages, and his rules of logic and scientific categorisation completely revolutionised not only how people thought about the world but also how theologians conceived the God of the Bible.

By the time of the Reformation, using an Aristotelian method was the undisputed way of doing theology.²⁴

However, **the darling of the retrieval project** is surely **Thomas Aquinas**.

²¹ Boersma, *Five Things Theologians Wish Biblical Scholars Knew*, 136.

²² Louis Markos, “Why We Still Need Plato,” *Credo Magazine*, March 22, 2022, <https://credomag.com/article/why-we-still-need-plato/>.

²³ Gamble, *The Whole Counsel of God*, 35.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 36.

Perhaps no one has done more to bring the philosophies of Plato and Aristotle into the church than Aquinas.

Carter acknowledges that, *“Thomas was first and foremost an Augustinian and so he integrated Aristotle into the Christian Platonist framework.”*²⁵

As **Nick Needham** explains, Aquinas’s theology was based on his attempt to reconcile Catholic teaching with Aristotle’s philosophy—

“Unlike [others] who used Aristotle only in a very limited and selective way, Aquinas brought about an intimate blend between Aristotle and the Catholic faith, like water mixed with wine....

*So for Aquinas, Aristotle’s philosophy laid the foundation for a rational knowledge of the universe; divine revelation then built the temple of Christian truth on that foundation.”*²⁶

Barrett sees Aquinas’ scholasticism as crossing *“exegetical, theological, and philosophical lines.”*²⁷

So Aquinas is held up before us as the **preeminent example of the premodern exegesis** and theology that we are supposed to retrieve from the Great Tradition.

Credo Magazine put out a whole issue in 2022 arguing that protestants can learn from Thomas Aquinas.

²⁵ Carter, “The Great Tradition Retrieval Project.”

²⁶ Nick Needham, *2000 Years of Christ’s Power: The Middle Ages*, Newly Revised Edition, vol. 2 (Ross-shire, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2016), 283–284.

²⁷ Barrett, *The Reformation as Renewal*, 114.

Even though **Martin Luther** once wrote that Thomas Aquinas is “*the source and foundation of all heresy, error, and obliteration of the Gospel,*”

one author wrote that we should appreciate and appropriate Aquinas a “*sounder scholastic.*”²⁸

J. V. Fesko opens his article by observing that—

*“If we listen to the noisy din of some self-professed Protestants, medieval theologian Thomas Aquinas should be left to the dustbin of history because his doctrine stands at odds with the teaching of scripture and the solas of the Reformation.”*²⁹

Admittedly, I am one voice in that “noisy din!”

Despite acknowledging Aquinas’ problematic idea of justification as infused righteousness, Fesko argues that we shouldn’t “cancel” Aquinas but remember and benefit from him.

We are, therefore, presented with a persistent pressure from theologians such as Scott Swain, Michael Allen, J. V. Fesko, David VanDrunen,, James Dolezal, Matthew Barrett, and Craig Carter who are calling on the church to embrace “Reformed Thomism.”³⁰

²⁸ David S. Sytsma, “Appreciating and Appropriating a ‘Sounder Scholastic’: Thomas Aquinas and the Protestant Reformation,” *Credo Magazine*, June 23, 2022, <https://credomag.com/article/appreciating-and-appropriating-a-sounder-scholastic/>.

²⁹ J. V. Fesko, “Should Old Aquinas Be Forgot? Infused Habits and the Doctrine of Salvation,” *Credo Magazine*, June 27, 2022, <https://credomag.com/article/should-old-aquinas-be-forgot/>.

³⁰ Craig A. Carter, “Renaissance or Revision? Metaphysical Departures from Classical Trinitarian Theism,” in *On Classical Trinitarianism: Retrieving the Nicene Doctrine of the Triune God*, ed. Matthew Barrett (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic: An Imprint of InterVarsity Press, 2024), 617.

As **Carter** writes, “Reformed Thomism is the particular form of Christian Platonism that I find most convincing.”³¹

But at this point **surely we’re compelled to ask**, why does the church need the help of **dead pagans** like Plato and Aristotle, and why do we need the help of **dead heretics** like Aquinas?

Would Tertullian not ask us today—

“What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?”³²

To push back against the retrievalist efforts to rehabilitate the images of Plato, Aristotle, and Aquinas like **some glitzy Hollywood PR firm** doing all they can to “control the narrative,”

let me ask in general why the church has any need for the philosophies of pagans and heretics?

Why do we need a philosophical interpretation of Scripture?

Are the Scriptures not sufficient?

Let me remind you of what **Paul thought about the natural ability of man** to think and reason rightly about God.

³¹ Craig A. Carter, “The Superiority Of Pre-Critical Metaphysics: Why We Need To Recover Christian Platonism,” *Journal of the Institute of Reformed Baptist Studies* 6 (2019): 7.

³² Nick Needham, *2000 Years of Christ’s Power: The Age of the Early Church Fathers*, Newly Revised Edition, vol. 1 (Ross-shire, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2016), 140.

Romans 1:21-23—

21 **For even though they knew God, they did not glorify Him as God or give thanks, but they became futile in their thoughts, and their foolish heart was darkened.**

22 **Professing to be wise, they became fools,**

23 **and exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the likeness of corruptible man and of birds and four-footed animals and crawling creatures.**

1 Corinthians 2:14-16—

14 **But a natural man does not accept the depths of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually examined.**

15 **But he who is spiritual examines all things, yet he himself is examined by no one.**

16 **For who has known the mind of the Lord, that he will direct Him? But we have the mind of Christ.**

So I echo the words of **Cornelius Van Til** who wrote in a letter to **Francis Schaeffer**—

“No form of natural theology has ever spoken properly of the God who is there.

None of the great Greek philosophers, like Plato and Aristotle, and none the great modern philosophers, like Descartes, Kant, Hegel or Kierkegaard and others, have ever spoken of the God who is there.

The systems of thought of these men represent a repression of the revelation of the God who is there.”³³

³³ Cornelius Van Til to Francis A. Schaeffer, March 11, 1969, in “A Letter from Cornelius Van Til to Francis Schaeffer,” *Ordained Servant* 6, no. 4 (October 1997): 77–80, <https://www.opc.org/OS/html/V6/4d.html>.

Or perhaps you need to hear the words of **Lewis Sperry Chafer** to remind you that—

“It may be difficult for the spiritually enlightened mind to comprehend the fog of confusion in which the often sincere but unregenerate men are plunged.

It should be remembered that argument does not create divine enlightenment. Only by the new birth can one ‘see the kingdom of God.’ The cure for spiritual darkness is ‘the light of the world.’

The gropings of natural men—and sometimes they are men of great mental powers—are varied and complex.

However, they have formulated certain general lines of philosophy, and these, like the false religions of the earth, bespeak the spiritual limitations of fallen man.”³⁴

I would also like to push back, **and push back hard** against the **specific efforts to rehabilitate Aquinas** and present him to us as if he were among the orthodox.

I would argue that Aquinas was, plainly, a heretic.

Jeffrey D. Johnson, president of Grace Bible Theological Seminary, has done the church a great service with his excellent book, ***The Failure of Natural Theology: A Critical Appraisal of the Philosophical Theology of Thomas Aquinas***.³⁵

³⁴ Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 1993), 162.

³⁵ Jeffrey D. Johnson, *The Failure of Natural Theology: A Critical Appraisal of the Philosophical Theology of Thomas Aquinas* (Conway, AR: Free Grace Press Academic, 2021).

As he carefully and clearly points out,
Aquinas rejects core tenets of the gospel.³⁶

Aquinas denied penal substitutionary atonement.

He denied justification by faith alone and by Christ's finished works alone.

He taught that the sacraments were necessary for salvation and that works were necessary to make satisfaction.

Further, he taught the idea of a treasury of merit and the related idea of indulgences and Aquinas promoted the idea of purgatory.

So **Johnson** is well-founded in his claim that—

“To unite Thomas with the Reformers is to undo the Reformation.

Aquinas, as the chief authority of the Counter-Reformation, is not friend but foe to Protestantism. Though Thomas of Aquino is called the Angelic Doctor by some, the Word of God is not so accommodating to those who pervert the gospel of Jesus Christ:

‘If we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed.’ (Gal 1:8).”

Therefore, surely we must reject dead pagans and, especially, **the darling of the retrievalists, Aquinas the heretic.**

³⁶ Johnson, *The Failure of Natural Theology*, 209–217.

So the **philosophical interpretation of Scripture** is the **first concern** I would raise, followed by the **second concern** of a theological interpretation of Scripture.

b. Theological Interpretation

There is a clear agenda within the retrieval movement to convince the church to embrace not only a philosophical interpretation of Scripture and method of theology, but also a **theological interpretation of Scripture**.

As **Gavin Ortlund** writes in his book, ***Theological Retrieval for Evangelicals***—

“Like the turn toward theological interpretation in biblical theology, the turn toward retrieval in systematic and historical theology lacks official boundaries and resists precise definition. It is better understood as a set of shared loyalties or instincts in theological method—an overall attitude guided by the conviction that premodern resources are not an obstacle in the age of progress but a well in the age of thirst.”³⁷

David Starling defines the exegetical and theological method:

“Theological Interpretation of Scripture is an approach to biblical interpretation that approaches the text with explicitly theological presuppositions, questions and concerns, seeking to hear in Scripture not only the thoughts and voices of its various human authors but a word from God that functions as the primary and authoritative source for our knowledge of him.”³⁸

³⁷ Gavin Ortlund, *Theological Retrieval for Evangelicals: Why We Need Our Past to Have a Future* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2019), 17.

³⁸ David I. Starling, “Theological Interpretation of Scripture,” *The Gospel Coalition*, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/essay/theological-interpretation-of-scripture/>.

He argues that, “an overtly theological interpretive stance is a legitimate and fruitful approach to biblical interpretation.”³⁹

Advocates of a **Theological Interpretation of Scripture (TIS)** claim that **literal-grammatical-historical hermeneutics** within Protestantism is the result of the influences of the Renaissance and the Enlightenment on the Church.⁴⁰

Therefore, in the words of **Daniel Treier**, the objective is to—
“reverse the dominance of historical criticism over churchly reading of the Bible and to redefine the role of hermeneutics in theology.”⁴¹

Not be left out, **Matthew Barrett** promoted as **as-yet-unpublished systematic theology** by stating—

“While some systematics neglect hermeneutics, I will present a hermeneutic that listens to the best interpretive insights of a theological interpretation of scripture.

In contrast to biblicism’s ahistorical indifference, I will consider the superiority of pre-critical readings of sacred scripture to help the Christian understand why his or her theology is distinctively Christian to begin with.”⁴²

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Daniel J. Treier, *Introducing Theological Interpretation of Scripture: Recovering a Christian Practice* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 12–13.

⁴¹ Ibid., 12–13. For an excellent rebuttal of TIS, see Jamie Bissmeyer, “A Better Hermeneutic? A Comparison of TIS and LGH Approaches to Justification in Job” (paper presented at the Council on Dispensational Hermeneutics Conference, 2023), http://dispensationalcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/Bissmeyer__CDH-2023-Paper.pdf.

⁴² Matthew Barrett, “I Am Writing a Systematic Theology!,” Matthew Barrett (Substack), June 7, 2022, <https://matthewbarrett.substack.com/p/i-am-writing-a-systematic-theology>.

It ought to be clear that these **twin concerns** of a philosophical and a theological interpretation of Scripture are a **deliberate rejection** of the **literal-grammatical-historical hermeneutic**.

As such, the retrieval project is asking us to change not only **our approach to the interpretation of Scripture**, **but also our approach to the organisation** of Scripture's doctrines that we call theology.

But this ultimately reflects a lack of **confidence in the authority sufficiency of Scripture**.

Why else would we need the metaphysical ideas of who God is from the philosophers?

Why else would we need to use doctrinal lenses in the theological interpretation of Scripture as we short-circuit the exegetical process?

As **Jeffrey Johnson** rightly asserts—

“Scripture is sufficient in revealing God to us.... Pagan philosophy only distorts the message of Scripture when we seek to use it as a handmaiden to theology. God has promised to destroy the wisdom of the wise through the Word of God.

Let us not, therefore, be deceived into thinking that we can't properly understand the personal God of the Bible without looking to the so-called wise men of this world who knowingly rejected the knowledge of the personal God of natural revelation.”⁴³

⁴³ Jeffrey D. Johnson, *The Revealed God: An Introduction to Biblical Classical Theism* (Conway, AR: Free Grace Press, 2023), 250.

Or as **Brad Klassen** warns, “*It is important to realize that ‘the Great Tradition’... is a very mixed bag. Those who propose ‘retrieval’ without careful qualification directly undermine what the Reformation fought to recover.*”⁴⁴

As I’ll now state positively in making my case, we need to remain **steadfastly committed to *Sola Scriptura*** and to the **biblicist convictions that flow from that commitment.**

Therefore, **we need to embrace an exegetical method of theology.**

THE CASE

While the term “biblicist” is typically used with derision,⁴⁵ it is nevertheless the **best and most apt descriptor** of our position.

Foundational to our position is a commitment to *Sola Scriptura*.

⁴⁴ <https://x.com/BradKlassen4/status/1647250174241042434>

⁴⁵ See, for example, R. Scott Clark, *Recovering the Reformed Confession: Our Theology, Piety, and Practice* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2008), 17–27.

Sola Scriptura is, of course, the phrase that expresses the Reformation doctrine that the Bible is **the sole and sufficient authority** by which all matters of faith and practice may be settled.⁴⁶

Upon this foundation, **we build at least five convictions.**

We believe that because God gives us in Scripture all that we need to live a life that is pleasing to Him, we should practice:

1. **A presuppositional approach** to Scripture that affirms the eternal existence of almighty God and His progressive, written revelation collected in the sixty-six-book canon of Scripture, which is inerrant and infallible in the autographs.⁴⁷
2. **An interpretational approach** that is defined by as a literal-grammatical-historical hermeneutic.
3. **An organisational approach** that is defined as an **exegetical method of theology.**
4. **A proclamational approach** that takes the form of expository preaching.
5. **A nouthetical approach** that takes the form of biblical counselling.

I would contend that the commitment to *Sola Scriptura* and the five convictions listed are what we may consider to be the **substance of biblicism** today.

⁴⁶ Alan Cairns, *Dictionary of Theological Terms* (Belfast; Greenville, SC: Ambassador Emerald International, 2002), 422.

⁴⁷ John MacArthur and Richard Mayhue, *Biblical Doctrine: A Systematic Summary of Bible Truth*, ed. John MacArthur and Richard Mayhue (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017), 26.

It is not a perfect term and it often courts controversy, but as **MacArthur and Mayhue** state—

“While many would label us fundamentalists, this term can be historically and pejoratively misleading. For almost four decades, we have periodically considered what one word would best describe us.... While not a perfect term, we have chosen biblicists, because at the core of our convictions lies an unshakable trust in God’s inerrant and infallible Bible, rightly interpreted.”⁴⁸

While those who reject biblicism and caricature its convictions contend that it is a recent term, it can actually be found, ironically, in the words of one of the most highly regarded **Dutch reformers, Gisbertus Voetius**, who wrote in 1669—

“Orthodox theologians are rightly termed ‘biblicists’ (scripturarii) in contrast to its despisers, for the Bible alone is the sole principle of faith and theology.”⁴⁹

This is the same concept that **John Sailhamer** communicates in his definition—

“[Biblicism] refers to any approach to theology in which the Bible itself is understood as divine revelation and the sole source in matters of faith and practice.”⁵⁰

This is, clearly, where **the term needs clarification**, much in the same way that the term *Sola Scriptura* needs to be clarified.

⁴⁸ MacArthur and Mayhue, *Biblical Doctrine*, 26.

⁴⁹ Gisbertus Voetius, *Selectarum Disputationum Theologicarum*, vol. 5 (Utrecht: Antonius Smytegelt, 1669), 6.

⁵⁰ John H. Sailhamer, *Introduction to Old Testament Theology: A Canonical Approach* (Grand Rapids, MI: ZondervanPublishingHouse, 1995), 152.

When we speak of the Bible alone as our final authority, **we do not mean** that we reject creeds, confessions, or other secondary sources of biblical truth.

This is where the idea of **“no creed but the Bible”** comes in, and we join with the retrievalists in rejecting this idea.

As biblicists, **we do not advocate** for what is correctly termed **“solo scriptura” or “nuda scriptura.”**

As **Scott Manetsch** explains—

“Evangelical Christians sometimes misunderstand the Reformation doctrine of sola Scriptura to mean that the Bible is the Christian’s only theological resource, that it can and should be denuded of its churchly context (hence nuda Scriptura). Such an understanding is altogether incorrect.”⁵¹

When we use the term **“Sola Scriptura,”** we mean that **Scripture alone is our final authority for doctrine and practice**, as opposed to the idea that tradition has an equal or greater authority.

But that is **precisely what we mean as biblicists** when we speak of the Bible being the sole authority of faith and theology.

It is not an ahistorical rejection of creeds, confessions, or the development of doctrine in historical theology.

⁵¹ Scott M. Manetsch, “Is the Reformation Over? John Calvin, Roman Catholicism, and Contemporary Ecumenical Conversations,” *Themelios* 36, no. 2 (2011): 199.

It is a commitment to the preeminence of Scripture as divine revelation which means it has **ultimate authority and complete sufficiency**.

Therefore, I am commending a **biblicism that upholds *Sola Scriptura*** and its implications for theology.

In the words of **John Frame**, I am arguing that—

*“Sola Scriptura is the doctrine that Scripture, and only Scripture, has the final word on everything, all our doctrine, and all our life. Thus it has the final word even on our interpretation of Scripture, even in our theological method.”*⁵²

In this, I am saying nothing different to what **Graham Cole** does when he writes in his book, ***Theological Method***—

*“A robust evangelical doctrine of Scripture construes Scripture in a threefold way: (1) Scripture is the definitive source for our knowledge of God: his character, will, and ways. (2) Scripture is the verbally inspired, definitive witness to the words and acts of God in history. (3) Scripture is not only a source and a witness but also the norm by which theological proposals are to be tested. In terms of authority, Scripture is the norma normans (norming norm).”*⁵³

⁵² John M. Frame, “In Defense of Something Close to Biblicism: Reflections on *Sola Scriptura* and History in Theological Method,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 59, no. 2 (1997): 272.

⁵³ Graham A. Cole, *Theological Method: An Introduction*, Short Studies in Systematic Theology (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2025), 24.

Cole, in fact, affirms that **Scripture must have the final word** in all matters, as he writes in another book, **Faithful Theology**:

*“Doing theology wisely means learning from the past both positively and negatively. However, in theology tradition can only ever be a norma normata (a ruled norm). Again, in a contest between Scripture and tradition, Scripture constitutes the final court of appeal in an evangelical methodology.”*⁵⁴

So then, where is the contention? What is the controversy?

I am arguing that this is nothing more than the **reformational principle of Sola Scriptura** that we, as **biblicists**, are committed to.

However, it should be clear that much of the theological retrieval project—especially as it seeks to retrieve the so-called Great Tradition with its emphasis on both a philosophical and theological method of interpreting and theologising Scripture—has departed from Sola Scriptura.

⁵⁴ Graham A. Cole, *Faithful Theology: An Introduction*, ed. Graham A. Cole and Oren R. Martin, Short Studies in Systematic Theology (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020), 41

When proponents of the Great Tradition tell us that we need to read Scripture in search of a deeper, spiritual sense that goes beyond the literal,⁵⁵

or when they tell us to understand Scripture's revelation of God in light of Platonic and Aristotelian metaphysics,⁵⁶

then they have abandoned Sola Scriptura as they elevate philosophy and theology to levels of authority that compete with Scripture.

What the retrievalists are advocating is the **insufficiency of Scripture for the task of theology.**

According to them, we cannot interpret Scripture or organise its doctrines into biblical or systematic theologies

without the use of **philosophies** that are derived from **dead pagans**

or the use of **theological traditions** that are derived from **dead heretics.**

You make mock my biblicist stand, or even dismiss me as unsophisticated and ahistorical, but even if I am alone, I will continue to point out the **shameful nakedness of the emperor.**

The Great Tradition, and its darling Thomas Aquinas, is not something that we want to retrieve.

To put it in positive terms, **I am advocating for the sufficiency of Scripture for the task of theology.**

⁵⁵ "The spiritual meaning of the text often goes beyond the limits of what the literal sense says, but all spiritual meaning must be consistent with, and grow out of, the literal sense of the text (1 Pet. 1:10–12)." *Carter, Interpreting Scripture with the Great Tradition*, 170.

⁵⁶ Boersma, *Five Things Theologians Wish Biblical Scholars Knew*, 39–40.

That doesn't mean that I do not value creeds, confessions, or the discerning use of historical theology.

What it does mean is that I am **committed to *Sola Scriptura* and an exegetical method of theology** which begins with the application of a literal-grammatical-historical hermeneutic.

In the words of **Bernard Ramm**, in his book **Protestant Biblical Interpretation**—

*“Exegesis is prior to any system of theology. The Scriptures are themselves the divine disclosure. From them is to be derived our system of theology. We can only know the truth of God by a correct exegesis of Scripture. Therefore exegesis is prior to any system of theology.”*⁵⁷

As he elaborates—

*“The historic Protestant position is to ground theology in Biblical exegesis. A theological system is to be built up exegetically brick by brick. Hence the theology is no better than the exegesis that underlies it. The task of the systematic theologian is to commence with these bricks ascertained through exegesis, and build the temple of his theological system.”*⁵⁸

⁵⁷ Bernard Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation: A Textbook of Hermeneutics*, Third Revised Edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1970), 168.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 169.

CONCLUSION

Therefore, **whether you call it biblicism or fundamentalism or a Reformed commitment to *Sola Scriptura*** or something else entirely, I am not particularly concerned.

What I am calling you to is a **commitment to *Sola Scriptura*** and the **conviction that it is sufficient for theology.**

If you embrace what I am calling biblicism, then you will **reject the philosophical and theological methods** of interpreting Scripture in order to **embrace an exegetical method of theology.**

For, as **J. I. Packer** said so well—

“The Bible... does not need to be supplemented and interpreted by tradition, or revised and corrected by reason. Instead, it demands to sit in judgment on the dictates of both; for the words of men must be tried by the Word of God.

The Church collectively, and the Christian individually, can and do err, and the inerrant Scripture must ever be allowed to speak and correct them.”⁵⁹

So as I issue a clarion call to embrace a commitment to the authority and sufficiency of Scripture in the **task of theology,** I ask with Tertullian, “What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?”

What have dead pagans like Plato and Aristotle
or dead heretics like Thomas Aquinas
have to do with the church and its theology?

⁵⁹ J. I. Packer, “Fundamentalism” and the Word of God: Some Evangelical Principles (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1958), 48.